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ABSTRACT

Many of John Dewey's ideas concerning ethics and the universalization of democratic habits of thought and action are especially relevant to a discussion of adult literacy as a means of developing social intelligence in a democratic society. Dewey's basic ethical principles are manifest in approaches to adult literacy education such as those conceived and practiced by Horton and the Highlander Folk School, Freire, Hunter and Harman, Coles, and Kozol. Particularly relevant to a discussion of the objectives of adult literacy education is Dewey's faith in the individual for intelligent and responsible action. The implications of a basic faith in people's ability to reflect and decide what is good for them in the structure of adult literacy programs are various. For example, this basic faith means that program developers and literacy teachers must come to grips with the individual's, community's, and instructor's beliefs, mores, and perceptions of reality, as well as with the manner in which these overlap and interact. Then, program developers should devise community-based programs centering on local needs and themes that emerge from individuals in the community. (MN)

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Adult Literacy Education: An Ethical Endeavor

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> In morals, the infinitive and the imperative develop from the participle, present tense. Perfection means perfecting, fulfillment, fulfilling, and the good is now or never. . . .
> --John Dewey

Is ethics a necessary part of adult literacy education? Shouldn't literacy education in a pluralistic society attempt to be as value-neutral as possible? If one accepts the Pragmatic philosophical contention that the individual is a process of becoming in a social context and the concomitant contention that how one perceives the nature of the individual results in certain ways of acting, then adult literacy education ultimately deals with ethical questions. How one perceives the adult non-reader and writer--either as competent and capable of creative action and intelligent judgment or as incompetent and unable to act meaningfully upon the world--is an ethical matter.

Kozol (1980) contends that adult literacy is a moral venture and that one must always ask what literacy is for. Freire (1970a,b; 1973; 1978) continuously asserts that one cannot examine adult literacy outside of the specific cultural, economic, political, and ethical context. Ultimately, Riordan (1976) contends that adult education as conceived by Freire deals with ethical choices which propose "human liberation in direct opposition to dehumanizing structures" (Riordan, 1976, p. 6).

The purpose of this article is to explore from a Pragmatic philosophical perspective the relationship between ethics and adult literacy education. I believe that the recent, and growing, clamor for literacy training of the most reductive kind requires such an exploration. What exactly are our moral responsibilities as adult educators? How do these responsibilities, or lack thereof, manifest themselves in the literacy programs we design and implement?

The article is divided into three parts. 1) I present some ethical principles of John Dewey. 2) I provide examples of what I believe is the most important idea of Dewey for adult literacy: his faith in the individual for intelligent and responsibile action. 3) I discuss the implications of Dewey's ethical ideas for adult literacy education.

Some Ethical Principles of John Dewey

Dewey is concerned with universalizing democratic habits of thought and action. He maintains that in a democracy people must deal with moral disputes by submitting them to the processes of social intelligence. And social intelligence is the method of democracy. It acknowledges the fact that in a free society there will always be conflicts and clashes of values. It also contends, however, that the best way of dealing with such conflicts is by bringing them out into the open where all of the available facts can be publicly examined by using the experimental or scientific method. The solutions to such conflicts will thus not be ultimate answers to be rigidly adhered to for all time, but instead will be working hypotheses which will be used and constantly tested, affirmed, or rejected.

Dewey argues strongly against all absolutist notions of ethics and against any abstract or hypothetical conceptions of ethical activity. Morals, he says, deals with the means, ends, obligations, and actualities of concrete existence. Human ideals are constructed by creative social activity: "Morals is as much a matter of interaction of a person with his social environment as walking is an interaction of legs with a physical environment (Dewey, 1922, p. 178). Thus, morals involves social intelligence as a function of behavior

in specific social context. Likewise, Dewey maintains that freedom is not merely a product or a state, but is also a process or way of acting in specific social contexts.

Social intelligence for Dewey involves the habits of experimental thought, inquiry, and verification within a given social context (Guinolic, 1976). There is no guarantee that the use of social intelligence will work all the time or that it will solve all moral questions. However, Dewey maintains that if one accepts his contentions that the individual is a process, that reality is a process of becoming, and that freedom is the power of varied and flexible growth which emerges from intelligent choice, then social intelligence actualizes freedom through people's interaction with their world (Dewey, 1928, p. 202).

Social intelligence is most effective in small face-to-face groups since the individual is basically related to various groups in society and not to the society or nation as a whole (Dewey, 1927, p. 111). Such face-to-face groups not only allow for intelligent cooperation among individuals, but also are most conducive for the development of social conditions which will foster social intelligence. Most importantly, such face-to-face social situations help people realize that the locus of moral control resides in them and their actions and shared creative experiences within the specific social context rather than in some absolute or abstract moral dicta usually imposed upon them by the Church, State, or power elite. (The communidades de base, or grass-roots communities, which have developed at a phenomenal rate in Latin America during the last two decades or so are a manifestation of the power of such face-to-face groups. As Lernoux observes:

> The Christian communities are the building blocks of a new society--religious groups that are also people's councils, linking Catholicism with civic action, education with freedom, and solidarity with Christ. That association of piety, learning, and civic action is revolutionary on a continent where the only solidarity hitherto known has been one of oppression. Needless to say, most of the military regimes think the whole idea subversive. [Lernoux, 1980, p. 389])

Social intelligence, the shared social formulations and testing of hypotheses in response to moral conflicts, allows society to avoid two extremes: the authoritarian or dictatorial imposition of solutions to problems; and the anarchic position which asserts that everyone has a right to do whatever one wants. According to Guinlock (1976), Dewey maintains that:

> If modes of behavior are determined in advance (perhaps regimented by external authority), or if--at the other extreme--they become completely chaotic, then intelligence and individuality have no essential function. In either case, freedom is negated. (Guinlock, 1976, p. xxxvii)

Quite often in American society, however, both in Dewey's time and today, the imposition of "external authority" is not overt, painful, or even recognizable as such by many people. It involves, to use Freire's appropriate terminology, the "extension" of one group's views of social and political reality upon others without regard for the others' views. Such imposition, says Dewey, is a subtle form of coercion or suppression:

> It gives individuals no opportunity to reflect and decide upon what is good for them. Others who are supposed to be wiser and who in any case have more power decide the question for them and also decide the methods and means by which subjects may arrive at the enjoyment of what is good for them. (Dewey, 1937, p. 259)

Diametrically opposed to this subtle form of suppression is Dewey's contention that democracy involves the faith that each individual in society has

something to contribute and whose contribution can only be assessed as it enters freely into the final pooled social intelligence (Dewey, 1937, p. 260). Faith in democracy involves faith in the free play of acts and ideas, free inquiry, free communication, and free access to participation.

Before individuals can freely, actively, and creatively participate in making socially intelligent decisions, before they can participate in creating and achieving not only their own freedom but freedom for society as a whole, social conditions and opportunities must be arranged to allow for such participation. As long as social conditions are static and oppressively unequal, Dewey says that it is absurd to think that people will somehow change for the better. More recently, and more directly related to adult literacy, Saxe and de Lone (1975) have made the same point as Dewey. They argue that literacy programs which are not also based upon a change in social conditions and a realignment of power, influence, income, and opportunity will have little chance for success. And when those with power and influence refuse to allow for changed social conditions and opportunities and refuse to allow for active participation by all people in shaping their lives and society, they quite often "blame the victims" for being victims. Dewey says:

> The intellectual blindness caused by privileged and monopolistic possession is made evident in "rationalization" of the misery and cultural degradation of others which attend its existence. These are asserted to be the fault of those who suffer; to be the consequence of their own improvidence, lack of industry, willful ignorance, etc. (Dewey, 1922, p. 186)

I believe that Dewey's analyses are powerful and immediately related to any discussion of adult literacy. All or most of his ideas are manifest in the approaches to adult education in general and adult literacy

education in particular as conceived and practiced by such people as Horton and the Highlander Folk School (Adams, 1972), Freire (1978), Hunter and Harman (1979), Kozol (1980), and others.

Dewey is especially relevant to a discussion of adult literacy as a means of empowerment and development of social intelligence in a democratic society because, as one Dewey scholar observes, he was, like the educators cited above, far too intelligent to be an intellectual, in the pejorative sense of that word. Dewey knew that one can find out more about people and their interests, needs, beliefs, values, and so forth by asking them, by talking things over with them, by asking them "where the shoe pinches":

> This respect for the experience of other men, this willingness to learn from them what they have found out, above all, to learn by working with them, is the very core of John Dewey the man, and it is the core of his philosophy as well. (Randall, 1953, p. 1v)

And I maintain that it is the ethical core of adult literacy and adult literacy education as well.

Faith in People

Although all of Dewey's ethical ideas are immediately relevant to adult education, I believe that for adult literacy the most important idea is Dewey's faith in the individual for intelligent and responsible action. This faith in people entails a belief that each individual has something to contribute to society. Moreover, this faith assumes that people are able to decide what is good for them. Finally, it assumes that if one wants to find out about people and their interests, needs, beliefs, values, and so on, then one must go to the people directly and ask them and not simply make assumptions about what they might need, believe, and so forth.

In this section, I want to present some examples which I believe make manifest in actual practice the ethical ideas of Dewey. These examples include Cole's (1970; 1982) attitude toward the adults with whom he works and studies, and the practice of adult education as developed and realized at the Highlander Folk School (Adams, 1972; Adams & Horton, 1975). These examples reflect a certain conception of people. They affirm the Deweyan faith in people in a democratic society. And such a conception and faith reflect an ethical affirmation of the adult as a competent individual who is capable of self-directed growth.

Coles (1970) describes in some detail how a female migrant farm worker in labor with her first child was denied admittance to any of the local hospitals or clinics. She was given a "run around" because she lacked money or medical insurance. The same thing occurred in another state when she had her second child. The woman told Coles, "So, after that, we knew what to expect, yes sir. You get to know about things after a while." Coles observes:

> She had learned something, learned a lot actually. Ignorant, barely able to write her name, never a reader, without a diploma of any kind, even one from a secondary or elementary school, she has yet figured out how certain private hospitals are run, what "criteria" they demand before a potential patient, however much in pain and in serious medical difficulty, becomes an actual patient. She needed no teacher, no social scientists to tell her the economic and political facts of life, of <u>her</u> life. (Coles, 1970, p. 7)

Cole's description of his interviews with this woman and with many other women and men (see, for example, Coles, 1971) reveals his attitude toward people, especially the poor, unemployed, and illiterate. This attitude, I believe is the very basis of any humanistic understanding of adult literacy and moreover

the basis for an ethical relationship between adult literacy educators and adult students. Coles respects people as individuals; each person is unique with a unique story to tell. He tries to understand their lives rather than looking for what he thinks should be there and he should find. He is willing to listen long and carefully to people, regardless of how seemingly ignorant or unpleasant they are. He believes that he can truly learn something from the people he interviews; he is open to their experiences and wisdom. He likewise believes that adults, however poor or ignorant, possess degrees of competency for dealing with their own lives. More importantly, he believes that even the "most truculent of people" often possess unrecognized "sentiments" and qualities of generous understanding and compassion which "might become harnessed to a given nation's, a given continent's, a given world's social policies" (Coles, 1982, p. 88).

Clearly, Coles's attitude toward and manner of working with adults embodies Dewey's basic faith in people. This faith in people for intelligent and responsible action is exemplified most dramatically in the practice of adult education at the Highlander Folk School (Adams, 1972; Adams & Horton, 1975). For almost 50 years, the Highlander Folk School has been an adult learning center which has worked with Southerners in their attempts to develop skills and capacities for becoming both individually and socially self-determining. The founder of the School is Myles Horton. His philosophy of education and that of the School throughout its long and often beleagured history is based upon many of the basic ideas of Dewey. Horton believes that the adult educator must: 1) respect adults as adults and individuals by not trying to convert them to one's way of thinking, but by attempting to bring forth their experiences, understanding, and knowledge; 2) try to understand the nature of people's lives by working <u>inside</u> their experiences instead of trying to dictate what those lives should be like;

3) start from where the people are by listening to and learning from them; 4) lastly, and perhaps most importantly, assume that people can answer their own questions, can come up with solutions to their own problems (Adams, 1972; Adams & Horton, 1975).

Specifically, Horton and his colleagues attempt to teach by getting people to talk about their own problems and possible solutions to those problems. The teachers' job is to raise and sharpen questions. The teachers' role is not to teach what they know, not to transfer their knowledge into the heads of their students, but to teach their "own capacity to learn" (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 23). Moreover, according to the Highlander philosophy, teachers are not value-neutral and education is not value-neutral. Rather, adult education is seen as an ethical enterprise and a potent force for social change. Like Dewey, the Highlander educators believe that education should be problem-centered, and it should have "tension between what is and what ought to be." Learning is that which strengthens "social forces in search of a liberating future out of a constricting present" (Adams & Horton, 1975, pp. 89-90). Thus, the Highlander Folk School never ignores teaching basic skills; however, these basic skills are not taught to help individuals fit into society or to adjust to an exploitive social and economic situation. Instead, such skills are taught as part of a critical analysis of society and an ongoing dialogue between the individual and society.

Various other literacy educators and authors have stressed many of the same principles that govern adult education at Highlander. Vella (1979) stresses the need to listen to adults and to develop an Adult/Adult relationship between teacher and student instead of the Adult/Child relationship which characterizes many adult programs. Freire (1978) contends that literacy workers who are

concerned with helping people gain control of their lives will work with them and not on them. Literacy workers will establish a "Subject-Subject" dialogue with their students in which together they will learn, analyze their social situations, and act upon the world. Finally, Knowles (1980) says that adult education must be based on andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn, rather than pedagogy, the art and science of teaching children. In andragogical programs, the learning environment is informal and the teacher and students together assess needs, establish goals, plan activities, and evaluate progress. A curriculum is not imposed upon students.

Implications for Adult Literacy Education

What implications do these basic ethical principles of Dewey made manifest in the work of Coles, the Highlander Folk School, and others have for adult literacy education? What does it mean to base literacy instruction upon a basic faith in people's ability to reflect and decide what is good for them? What does it mean to contend that literacy is an ethical process which involves an interaction between the individual and society? The implications are various.

The Pragmatic conception of education maintains that knowledge cannot be separated from action. Once thinking is separated from action in the world, separated from the lives of individual people in specific social situations, it becomes an abstract dialectic of concepts. And such an abstract dialectic results in abstract and arbitrary definitions and conceptions of adult literacy; it results in the lists of "required" skills which individuals must supposedly master before they can function adequately. Thus, in order to avoid such an abstract dialectic, adult literacy educators must first learn about the adults they are teaching by living and working with them.

What does it mean, for example, to be an illiterate Mexican-American migrant worker? How can literacy educators possibly understand the needs, interests, beliefs, and values of a particular migrant worker, not to mention those of a specific group, without working inside the migrant worker's experiences and listening to and learning from her? Consider the following vignette.

A Mexican-American migrant worker returns with her husband to the tiny, bare barracks apartment in the migrant camp that they and their two children temporarily call "home." She and her husband have been picking apples in the orchards for the past ten hours. They are hot, dirty, and exhausted. The autumn heat and humidity of southern Illinois hang on them, stooping their shoulders and bowing their heads. The woman needs to start supper for her family but agrees, through an interpreter, to talk with the university researchers about reading and writing while her husband showers in the communal bathhouse.

Although the woman is courteous, even deferential, to "los profesores" from the university, she expresses her puzzlement over why they want to talk with her. She cannot read or write and, in fact, has a difficult time printing her own name. The woman is in her middle-forties and has never attended school, either in Mexico or the United States. Her life has been spent in a struggle to provide the basic necessities of life for her family and herself. She has followed the harvests from one end of the country to the other in an often frantic attempt to find work.

The woman politely answers the researchers' questions about reading and writing. She has learned throughout her life to answer questions politely. After the researchers have collected their data and are packing their tape recorders, legal note-pads, and questionnaires, one of them asks the woman if

there are any questions she would like to ask them. The woman looks at the researchers carefully and, after a long pause, asks them why are they asking such questions of people who live in the camp: are they trying to help the people in the camp who can't read and write or are they doing it for themselves? The woman's large, dark eyes fix and stop the researchers in their busyness. They look at her steadily as she tells them in a firm but quiet voice that people who know how to read and write should help those who don't. If she knew how to read and write, she says, she would teach those who didn't know (Rigg, 1983).

Consider another vignette. The scene is an ABE classroom in a small church meeting room. The summer program is for migrant workers, and most of the students are young Mexican-Americans or Blacks. One teacher is working alone with a 55-year-old white woman. Ann was born and raised in the South, and her parents were poor share-croppers. Ann's stories of her childhood and her cotton-picking and field labor at times disorient the teacher: he feels that he is suddenly back in the grindingly oppressive and poverty-stricken world described by James Agee and photographed by Walker Evans (Agee & Evans, 1960) and not in the middle-American world of 1979.

Ann is married to a year-round orchard worker. She works as a cook for the orchard employees during the summer and fall months. She "never put a foot inside a school house door," but wants to read and write in order to become an aide in a local nursing home. She wants to write letters to her sister in Arkansas. Ann is eager and an especially fast learner. Her cheerfulness and hard work seem to mock the gloominess of the teacher. He often despairs that the best job offered Ann is one cleaning bedpans.

Together Ann and the teacher write a letter to the sister in Arkansas. Ann tells her sister that she is learning to read and write. She copies the letter in her own hand, reads it with obvious pride several times, addresses an envelope, reads the letter once more, and then seals it in the envelope. Together they walk to a mailbox to mail the letter. Ann tells the teacher that he can't imagine now she feels about writing her first letter. The teacher says, "Oh, I know just how your feel." "No, you don't," Ann corrects him, "you can't." After a moment's silence the teacher says, "You're right, Ann; I can't know."

These two brief encounters between literacy educators and two women who are most often simply categorized as "illiterate migrant workers" are fraught with implications for adult literacy education. Although both of these women are "illiterate migrant workers," their experiences, needs, interests, and social worlds are quite different. Thus, using just these two women as examples, it is obvious that literacy educators must know something about the social, historical, economic, and cultural pasts of their students if they want to be able to tap into those perceptions and experiences that really matter to them (Haase et al., 1979; London & Ewing, 1982). They must learn to speak to their students, not only in the students' language, "but in situations with which they are familiar and feel at ease, and which are appropriate to the transaction" (Hall, 1976, p. 117). They must not be guilty of the worst kind of illiteracy: "that of the expert who cannot speak in a language comprehensible except to other experts on illiteracy" (Kozol, 1980, p. 20).

The implications of a basic faith in people's ability to reflect and decide what is good for them for the structure of adult literacy programs are also various. Most directly, it means that program developers and literacy teachers must come to grips with, to borrow the phenomenological term, the

individuals' "stock of knowledge," that is, their beliefs, mores, and perceptions of reading and writing, the community's stock of knowledge, the teachers' stock of knowledge, and the manner in which these three overlap and interact (Collins, 1981; 1983). Such community-based programs should be based upon local needs and themes which emerge from individuals in the community.

Community-based programs which reflect the stocks of knowledge held by students, community, and teachers and are based upon dialogue between teachers and students as co-equals encourage critical thinking, action for change in the community, and the development of Dewey's social intelligence. They do not attempt merely to fit people to the economic order of society by training them for minimal skills and minimal jobs. For as Aronwitz (1981 argues:

> progressives must insist that reading and writing are not synonymous with critical thought and that the goals of a truly public education are not merely functional levels of reading and writing. (Aronowitz, 1981, p. 55)

Rather, the true goal of adult literacy education is an ethical one: the liberation of people for intelligent, meaningful, and humane action upon their world.

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